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ABSTRACT

"Our World," by Virginia prison inmate Marvin Atkinson, is a poem which aptly describes the isolation of Black Americans from the national ideals that America represents. To most Blacks these ideals are myths that continue not only to elude them but enslave them. Four American myths which stand in the way of 30 million Black people who are still struggling for true freedom in this country are: the "American Dream"; Equality; Equal Opportunity; and Blind Justice. The American Dream suggests that every American can get a job, own a home, have a wonderful family, and live happily as a full American, but for most Blacks, however, the Dream does not exist; they earn less than Whites, have a harder time getting a mortgage, and frequently live in poverty. Furthermore, the country's historically Black colleges and universities are in danger of losing their state support. Opponents of these schools argue that Black colleges are no longer relevant in an integrated university community. This is obviously not true, since almost half of Black students who graduate from college graduate from Black colleges. The unequal allocation of resources between Black and other colleges parallels the unequal system of justice in America. While those responsible for the savings and loan scandal get a slap on the wrist, a Black who robs a bank gets a maximum sentence. If America is ever to become the democracy that it is not, the lies of the American Dream--equality, equal opportunity, and justice--will have to become realities for Blacks. (PRA)

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IDENTIFYING THE MYTHS: LIES THAT FETTER THE HUMAN SPIRIT

by Johnny E, Tolliver
Annual Convention
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OUR WORLD

A PLACE, where a man thinks day in and day out.
A place where our dreams are developed,
Yet it seems that once we do fly away,
We no longer continue the development of those dreams.
It's like we just stop thinking, with no real plan.

A PLACE, where some re-evaluate,
Seeing exactly where they went wrong,
In hopes that we're able to fix those wrongs
Done once we do fly away.
But do you sometimes feel we'll never be able
To correct those wrongs done, fully?

A PLACE, where there're those who think our world is a game.
Not being able to really feel the serious effects
Our world presents,
Or is it just their way of trying to block out the realities?
But one must always know that our world is real
And shouldn't be blocked out, ever!

A PLACE, where nobody really knows you're there,
Even the so-called friends you left behind
Forget all about you.
Yet most family sticks by you;
Thank GOD for them and the fact
That they too didn't fly away.
Would you be able to handle life all alone in Our World?

A PLACE, where some of us just shoot the breeze, reminisce.
Some read, some write, some even develop skills
To prepare us for our flight.
But once we do actually fly away
We have to be ready.
Ready, if we are to survive outside of our cages
And take flight to the free world.

JUST as when the bird is freed from its cage,
It soars high, chirps loudly, and spreads its wings wide,
Overjoyed, for it's now free from its confinement.
Take the lesson that the bird teaches;

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Once you do fly away,
Always never forget that joy
You felt when you left those cages:
The ones existing in "Our World."

I have just read to you a poem entitled "Our World," written by Marvin Atkinson, also known as Marvin X. Marvin is an inmate at the Tidewater Correctional Facility #22 in Chesapeake, Virginia. On Wednesday evenings from 7:00 - 9:00 I meet with Marvin and three other inmates who are part of what they call the Literary Guild. Tidewater Correctional Facility #22 is a minimum security facility with 113 inmates, of whom approximately 90 are Black. In the state of Virginia, 70 percent of all those in prison are Black; in the United States of the nearly 750,000 prisoners, approximately 350,000 of them, or almost 50 percent, are Black; of the more than 700 inmates on death row, 40 percent of them are Black. Young Black men are the most under-educated, the most likely to be in special education classes in school, the most likely to drop out of school, the most unemployed, the most likely to be imprisoned, the most likely to be murdered, the most likely to commit murder--in fact, the most endangered member of the human race.

"Our World," the title of the poem I just read, is an apt descriptor for the isolated condition of Black people in America; and contrary to what some may think, Black people in America are as isolated as Blacks in South Africa from the national ideals that America represents. To most of us who are Black, these ideals are

myths--monumental lies that continue not only to elude us but to enslave us. And I come before you today not as a Black American who has not enjoyed some of the promises of America, but as one who knows firsthand what these promises can be and ought to be. However, the realities that we face each day belie the possibilities and relegate Black people to a dehumanized state of existence.

We can define myth in two ways: one enriches, the other vilifies; one seeks to explain natural phenomena, the other seeks to denature; one is literary, the other scatological; one is liberating, the other enslaving; one is truth glorified, the other lie personified. Today, I want to identify four American myths that not only get in the way of educating for freedom, but stand in the way of 30 million Black people who are still struggling for true freedom in this country. These myths are **the American Dream, Equality, Equal Opportunity, and Blind Justice.**

Succinctly, the American Dream means that every American can get the job he or she wants, can own a home, have a wonderful family and live happy as a full American. However, for most of the 30 million Black people in this country, even after having been part of America since August 1619, the American Dream does not exist. Martin Luther King said,

> "Somewhere we read one day, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that

> they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' But if a man does not have a job or an income, he has neither life, nor liberty, nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness; he merely exists."

According to the 1990 Census Report, 44.8 percent of Black children live in poverty. Moreover, Blacks and Hispanics with equivalent incomes to whites are denied mortgages at a rate of almost four to one, the denial rate at some lending institutions reaching 46 percent for Blacks and Hispanics, and only 12 percent for Whites. Blacks are the most unemployed, most undereducated group in America; and without the possibility of a good job, the other parts of the American Dream, that is, a home and a family, do not follow. However, in many cases, even if Blacks do have incomes equivalent to Whites, they are denied mortgages, which means they cannot own a home. And so goes the myth of the American Dream. I am compelled, therefore, to repeat what Martin Luther King said. "If a man does not have a job or an income, he has neither life, nor liberty, nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness; he merely exists."

A recent study by University of Michigan sociologist Reynolds Farley shows the following results in which respondents were shown diagrams of neighborhoods with different numbers of families.

"White respondents tended to prefer neighborhoods that were integrated in the sense of one Black house out of a total of 15 (about six percent), while Black respondents were much more likely to prefer integration in the sense of 50/50 White and Black." (Jet, 9 September 1991, 25) New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Philadelphia are among the ten most segregated cities in America.

Howard Schuman, a professor of sociology at the University of Michigan Survey Research Center, asserts:

> "When White Americans say they favor integrated schools or neighborhoods, what they really mean is a few Black students or families in a predominantly White environment. From 1972-86, the number of Americans supporting integrated schools has remained unchanged, with 98 percent saying they approve of their children attending school with 'a few Black children.' But the figure drops down to 75 percent when half the children are Black and drops further down to 40 percent when more than half are Black." (Jet, 9 September 1991, 25)

According to a two-year Census Bureau study entitled, "The Black Population in the United States: March 1990/89," college-educated Blacks earned less than college-educated Whites. Black men, age 25 and older with four years or more of college education, on average earned $31,000 in 1989, while White men the same age and

with equal education earned $41,000. White women, age 25 years and older with the same education earned $27,000, while Black women, same age and same education, earned $26,000 (Jet, 7 October 1991, 12).

Our Historically Black Colleges and Universities are under siege. Ever since the impetus toward court-ordered desegregation of higher education began in the early 1970s, when Blacks in Mississippi filed suit against the state charging it with operating two separate and unequal systems of higher education, a backlash against Black colleges has steadily swelled to the point that state-supported Black colleges now find themselves engaged in perhaps the most important litigation that they have ever faced. In the case now pending before the US Supreme Court, the United States vs. Mabus, the very existence of state-supported black colleges is threatened.

In the upcoming session of the United States Supreme Court, the justices will hear and render a momentous decision on this case, in which some Black citizens of Mississippi are arguing that the State of Mississippi operates two systems of higher education, one Black the other White, separate and unequal, clearly as unconstitutional as when the Supreme Court ruled in the landmark 1954 case, **Brown vs. the Topeka, Kansas Board of Education.** The Mabus case, however, represents the most crucial litigation case ever involving Historically Black Colleges, for the Justice Department has entered the case on the side of the plaintiffs; and

in its initial position, the Justice Department threatened the very survival of state-supported Black Colleges. In the original brief, the Justice Department argued that Mississippi should not be forced to provide additional funding to Black Colleges; for in doing so, the State would contribute to the perpetuation of segregation, which the Justice Department is committed to wipe out. Fortunately, the President's Board of Advisors on Black Colleges, chaired by former Howard University president Dr. James Cheek, met with the President in September and indicated to him that his chief legal counsel would receive a friend-of-the-court brief from the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, known as NAFEO. President Bush did intercede and have the Justice Department withdraw its original brief and submit another brief, this time arguing that the State should provide extra funding to the Black colleges. So at 9:00 a.m., November 13, 1991 the Supreme Court heard arguments in the case and will decide on the fate of all state-supported Black colleges and universities.

Arguments against these schools have been with us for a long time. These arguments state that Historically Black Colleges and Universities are now anachronisms, no longer relevant in an integrated university community, that they perpetuate segregation, that they are not viable institutions, educationally or economically. Truth, however, flies in the face of such nihilistic suggestions. Today, there are 149 Black colleges, 45 of which are state-supported. These 149 two- and four-year institutions are

scattered through 19 states, and represent several categories of institutions: small private, large private, small public, large public, urban, rural, church-related--in short, the same kind of diversity in size, in type, and in mission that represents the very best about higher education in America. And the history of one of these colleges can be replicated a hundredfold to dramatize the beginning of these schools for the purpose of providing an opportunity for them to educate young Black students because white America did not want to do so in an equal and fair way.

In 1837 in the small community of Cheney, Pennsylvania the first Historically Black College was founded. In 1992 Cheyney University will celebrate its 155th anniversary, and in that celebration it will not only be a celebration for Cheyney but a celebration for all Black Colleges and Universities. The founding of Cheney is unique only in Cheney's being the first, and it serves as a paradigm for the founding of most of the other 149 Black colleges and universities that are part of the more than 3500 institutions of higher learning in the United States. And their successes have not been told, and I want to tell their story so that all may hear and understand the important contributions these schools have made to America, and the absolute necessity that they continue not only to exist but to thrive and not be threatened by the racist legions that sit in legislatures, oversee state higher education systems, and stand before classrooms all over this land.

According to statistics included in the 1991 Almanac

supplement to The Chronicle of Higher Education, August 1991, during the Fall Semester of 1989, the year of the most recent figures from the Department of Education, enrollment in our nation's colleges and universities numbered 13.5 million students. Of that number 1.1 million, or 8 percent, were Black. Less than 20 percent of these Black students, or approximately 225,000, were enrolled in the 149 Black colleges and universities, which comprise only 4 percent of American colleges and universities; 102 of these Black colleges and universities are four-year institutions. Thus, in the 1989 Fall Semester, 20 percent of the Black students in college were enrolled in 4 percent of our colleges and universities (Data from page 3 of Almanac).

Also in 1989 1 million students received bachelor's degrees from America's 2127 four-year institutions; 58,000 of these degree recipients were Black, and 23,000 or 40 percent of these students earned their degrees from 102 Black four-year institutions. Therefore, 4 percent of America's four-year institutions awarded 40 percent of bachelor's degrees earned by Black students (Data compiled from page 13 of Almanac). Amazingly, almost half of America's Black college graduates in 1989, the latest year on which such information is available, came from Black colleges. Contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of black students in college do not attend Black colleges; in fact, since 1954, the percentage of Black students attending Black colleges has declined from 82% to 17% in 1991. However, and this is a most important point,

almost half of Black students who graduate from college graduate from Black colleges. And the allocation of resources to support these institutions is obscenely inadequate. Dr. Samuel Cook of the Ford Foundation summarizes the situation this way:

> "The tragic irony is that instead of the allocation of more resources for Black students and institutions, the norm in virtually every case is the allocation of less -- and generally embarrassingly less. Prevailing is a strange assumption, beyond the realm of rational intelligibility, that the cost of educating Blacks is infinitely less than that of educating Whites. But if reason, justice, and a sense of history are relevant, the assumption should be the reverse."

And the late President Lyndon B. Johnson declared:

> "You do not take a person who for years has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race and say, 'You're free to compete with others,' and justly believe you have been completely fair."

And so, in speaking about Black colleges and universities, we can affirm, "Never have so few done so much with so little."

But in speaking of the Savings and Loan scandal, we can affirm, "Never have so few stolen so much in such a short period of time." And yet, in the biggest, costliest crime in the history of the United States, these criminals are getting the equivalent

of slaps on the wrist. Let a Black man rob a bank, and he gets the maximum sentence. Justice in America is not blind, but it is for sale. The statistics I cited in the beginning about the disproportionate presence of Blacks in our penal systems are the most graphic illustration of a discriminatory criminal justice system.

The American Dream, Equality, Equal Opportunity, Justice is Blind--myths, colossal lies. And if America is ever to become the democracy that it is not, these myths will have to become realities. And if we are ever going to remove the myths that get in the way of educating for freedom, then we must transform the myths of the American Dream, Equality, Equal Opportunity, and Blind Justice into Truths that effectuate educating for freedom. If this does not happen, then America will have squandered a marvelous opportunity to live up to its ideals of liberty and justice, of opportunity and choice. A significant part of America will continue to be disenfranchised as this nation moves into the twenty-first century.